

# GENDER AND LOCAL LEVEL DECISION MAKING: Findings from a Case Study in Samangan

Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit

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## About the Author

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## About the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU)

The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) is an independent research organisation that conducts and facilitates action-oriented research and learning that informs and influences policy and practice. AREU also actively promotes a culture of research and learning by strengthening analytical capacity in Afghanistan and by creating opportunities for analysis and debate. Fundamental to AREU's vision is that its work should improve Afghan lives. AREU was established by the assistance community working in Afghanistan and has a board of directors with representation from donors, UN and multilateral organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

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## Glossary of Dari Terms

<i>Afghanis (Afs)</i>	The official Afghan currency (US\$1 = 43 Afs)
<i>arbab</i>	A village headman
<i>borqah</i>	Full body covering for women
<i>gozar</i>	Neighbourhood
<i>jihadi</i>	Fighter in the jihad, or holy war
<i>jirga</i>	A tribal or clan council
<i>kalantar</i>	Person responsible for representing the <i>gozar</i> (neighbourhood) to the municipality
<i>madrassa</i>	Religious school
<i>maharam</i>	Close male relative who is responsible for chaperoning a female while travelling or in public places
<i>manteqa</i>	Area, ward, or cluster of villages with a linked identity
<i>mullah</i>	Islamic cleric
<i>naan</i>	Literally “bread”, used to mean food or a meal in general
<i>namad</i>	Felted woolen rug
<i>naqes ul aqal</i>	Incomplete knowledge
<i>pardah</i>	Separation of women from men; literally “curtain”
<i>qoum</i>	From Arabic, meaning people, nation, tribe, group and indicating a solidarity group
<i>Quran</i>	Holy book of Islam
<i>shura</i>	Traditional council of elders
<i>uleswal</i>	District administrator appointed by the central government
<i>wakil-e gozar</i>	Officially appointed representative of the neighbourhood to the municipality

## Glossary of Uzbeki Terms

<i>buy</i>	Rich landowner
<i>chagbashi</i>	Man with responsibility for managing access to water between villages
<i>khel</i>	Family group
<i>zira</i>	Cumin [also in Dari]

## Glossary of Gender Concepts and Terms<sup>1</sup>

Authority	Power attached to a position that others see as legitimate.
Community	Group of people who share a common sense of identity and interact with each other on a sustained basis. Also, organisations, networks, village institutions and inter-household associations that make up local civil society. <sup>2</sup>
Community decision making	The political and social process and mechanisms through which decisions about issues related to the welfare of civil society are made.
Community institutions	Rules, norms, behaviour and practices that persist over time to serve collectively valued purposes. <sup>3</sup> These are often informal, with loose but widely understood structures and leadership entitlements.
Gender analysis	Examination of the situations of women and men and the relationships between them; considers roles and responsibilities, access to resources, activities and the opportunities and constraints they face relative to each other.
Gender relations	Relations between men and women, often expressed through the roles that they play in the household and the community as determined by their biological sex.
Gender roles	Learned behaviour that determines which activities, tasks and responsibilities are considered male or female, including reproductive, productive, community managing and political functions. <sup>4</sup>
Household	Social unit consisting of those who eat from the same pot.
Non-decision making	Creating or reinforcing barriers to the airing of issues about which there is concern or disagreement.
Norms	Rules and expectations of conduct which either prescribe a given type of behaviour or forbid it.
Participation	Active involvement of people in influencing and sharing control over the formal and informal institutions and decision making processes that affect their welfare, that of their families and communities.
Power	Ability to carry out decisions, achieve aims or further goals even when others are in disagreement; ability to exclude issues from decision making, effectively making them non-decisions. <sup>5</sup>
Production	Work done by both men and women for pay in cash or kind, including market production, domestic labour and subsistence production with actual value and potential exchange value. <sup>6</sup>
Reproduction	Childbearing and rearing, domestic tasks required to guarantee maintenance and reproduction of the labour force, including their care and maintenance. <sup>7</sup>
Solidarity	Unity as a group that produces or is based on common interests, objectives and standards.

<sup>1</sup> For useful resources on guidelines and concepts related to gender equality, see OECD. 1998. *DAC Sourcebook on Concepts and Approaches Linked to Gender Equality*. Paris: OECD. In the Afghan context see Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, S. 2002. *Report of the EC Rapid Reaction Mechanism Assessment, Afghanistan, Gender Guidelines*. EC Conflict Prevention and Crisis Management Unit.

<sup>2</sup> Kabeer, N. 1994. *Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought*. New York, NY: Verso, 304.

<sup>3</sup> Uphoff, N. 1986. *Local Institutional Development: An Analytical Sourcebook with Cases*. Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press.

<sup>4</sup> Moser, C. 1993. *Gender, Planning and Development: Theory, Practice and Training*. New York and London: Routledge.

<sup>5</sup> Kabeer, op cit.

<sup>6</sup> See Moser's Triple Roles Framework, 1989, and the work of economist Diane Elson.

<sup>7</sup> Moser, op cit.

## Section I: Introduction

The enthusiasm with which many donors set out to support Afghan women's right to participate in public life after the fall of the Taliban has proved more difficult to act upon than originally acknowledged. While some gains have been made at the policy level, for many women these have been largely rhetorical. This is in part due to an initial emphasis by the aid community on the concerns of educated and urban women who had been most visibly affected by the Taliban's harsh practices, which are likely very different from the concerns of uneducated and rural women.<sup>8</sup> Another reason is the fear of a backlash for addressing controversial issues, of which gender equity – a concept on which there is little consensus in the Afghan context – is considered to be one. This study has taken as one of its premises that the difficulty in making progress in this field is also partly due to a neglect of the particular social, economic, political and even geographic context within which women's lives are situated.

This paper is one of five case studies<sup>9</sup> conducted between March and October 2004, for the Gender and Local Level Decision Making Project of the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU). The overall project objective is to improve policies and programmes that aim to increase women's participation in public life. In order to do this the project seeks to generate a better understanding among NGOs, the UN, donors and the Afghan government about how decisions are made on priority household and community issues, and how men and women participate in the decision making process.<sup>10</sup>

This study uses a gender analysis – the examination of the situation of women and men and the relations between them – as a way to improve understanding of their activities, access to resources, and the opportunities and constraints they face relative to each other. In the Afghan context gender is a key determinant of the enjoyment of the right to participate in public life, with constraints attributed to cultural and social norms that are often justified by interpretations of Islamic religious principles. Gender analysis, often confused for analysis that looks only at the situation of women, is an important way to understand the different patterns of involvement, behaviour and activities that women and men have in making decisions that affect the lives of communities, families and the individuals living within them. This research was undertaken because of the perceived and real difficulties in creating effective policies and programmes for increasing women's participation in public life. However, this is not a study of the situation of women, but rather of locally defined roles and responsibilities of men and women, and the social norms that determine their participation in decision making on priority interests and concerns of families and communities.

In each field site the study aims to find out what are some of the gender based norms, roles and responsibilities involved in household level decision making. What are some of the household and community decision making processes, the methods

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<sup>8</sup> For further discussion on the causes and consequences of this bias, see Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, S. 2004. "Afghan Women on the Margins of the Twenty-first Century." In Donini, A., Niland, N. and Wermester, K. (eds) *Nation-Building Unravelling? Aid, Peace and Justice in Afghanistan*. Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press.

<sup>9</sup> The case studies of this project are as follows: a Pashtun village in Robat-e Sangi, Herat Province; ethnically mixed neighbourhoods in Mazar-e Sharif; Uzbek and Tajik villages in Hazrat-e Sultan and Khoram, Samangan Province; Hazara villages in Panjao, Bamyan Province; and ethnically mixed neighbourhoods in Kabul. These were chosen in order to have some geographic and ethnic diversity in the field sites.

<sup>10</sup> It was agreed with each NGO partner that findings would be considered and integrated into their programming and that AREU would work with them to identify appropriate ways to feed the findings back into the communities of study.



women and men use, and the social resources they draw upon to assert their interests within the household and community? What are some of the links, if any, between household and community level decision making, and do key community institutions reflect outcomes related to women's needs and interests?

The case studies are designed to stand alone, but only when read together can some of the nuances of difference in gender relations between field sites be understood. A briefing paper to be released in April 2005 examines the themes that have emerged across the case studies. This focuses on possible strategies to increase women's participation in development processes by capitalising on opportunities and dealing appropriately with challenges.

This case study explores these themes within two villages in Samangan Province. The primary field site was an Uzbek village in Hazrat-e Sultan District, and the secondary site was a Tajik village in Khoram District.

## Summary of findings<sup>11</sup>

Several findings from this study were revealed, relating to leadership, participatory institutions, and the factors that constrain women's participation in decision making.

### *Participation in institutions*

- **While the new Village Organizations (VO) established by Afghanaid expand the opportunity to increase participation of marginalised groups in decision making, existing institutions, attitudes and beliefs continue to impede this participation.** This includes the continued dominance of the elders and landed men in such processes, evidenced by the frustration expressed by landless men regarding the lack of consultation, as well as the lack of any women's involvement in or knowledge about the VO.
- **Formal education and NGO trainings for men and women – focused on building practical knowledge related to basic needs – increased the status of a few villagers.** This gave the men more respect and authority in decision making processes, related to their ability to communicate with outsiders and secure further aid for the village. However, local *purdah* norms placed restrictions on women's ability to take advantage of training opportunities.
- **Women and most of the younger men were thought to have no knowledge about anything outside of the household, creating a barrier to their participation in village level initiatives as well as in speaking with outsiders.** While most of the women agreed that they had no knowledge themselves, they expressed a desire to learn about affairs beyond the household and had varying interpretations of community events.
- **There is no resistance to women participating in income generation projects, as long as these projects do not challenge gender norms.** This is linked to perceptions that women's role is limited to activities "inside the

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<sup>11</sup> The following findings, and this paper as a whole, are referring specifically to the field sites in this case study. While there is some similarity in findings throughout the research case studies, findings are not meant to be generalised.

house”, and their inability to understand issues beyond it. This will present a challenge to any work that strives to include women’s participation in decision making and/or non-traditional activities.

***Constraints on women’s participation***

- **Spaces for women to socialise and participate in life outside of their households exist because of their simultaneous engagement in productive work and preparation for important local social events.** However, women have thus far not met for community development initiatives, and there is resistance to their participation. As a result, Afghanaid has found it difficult to develop women-specific initiatives in this area and to address the issue directly with influential men in the village.
- **Village men used the language of “democracy”, “participation” and “rights” when communicating with outsiders, but there was confusion and a lack of will related to the application of these concepts to the participation of women.** Men are aware that external agents want to hear these phrases, but in practice are finding new ways for those with power to share it amongst themselves.
- **Men provide misinformation to their wives in order to control their participation in affairs beyond the household, but women supplement this with information they gather through their own networks.** Women depend on their male relatives for information about issues outside of the home, strengthening men’s abilities to justify the prevention of their participation. Nevertheless, women have their own methods for finding information and do not necessarily believe the men’s narrative.
- **Violence against women is used as a way of reinforcing women’s adherence to local *purdah* norms, including mobility.** This is a serious constraint to promoting women’s participation, making it all the more important for aid staff to understand local gender dynamics and develop initiatives that ensure that women’s participation is seen as acceptable while increasing knowledge of alternative ways of dealing with conflict than violence.

## Section II: Context and Methodology

Samangan is primarily a rural province, bordered by Balkh to the west, Kunduz to the north, Baghlan to the east, and Bamyan and Saripul to the southwest. The province is made up of a Tajik majority and Uzbek, Pashtun and Hazara minorities. The capital and only urban centre of the province is Aybek (a.k.a. Samangan), a small city which was once a major trading post. The largest city nearby is Mazar-e Sharif, which draws migrant workers from both of the field sites in this research. Mazar is about a one-hour drive from the study village of Hazrat-e Sultan and about five hours from Khoram. The province was the site of major fighting between the Taliban and local militias, as well as between *jihadis* and the Soviets. Since the fall of the Taliban, the security situation has been generally calm when compared to many other parts of the country. The area was a stronghold of General Dostum, the Uzbek commander of *Junbish* and loyalties to him still remain. The Taliban attempted to recruit Uzbeks into their ranks during their intrusion in the north, yet many in Hazrat-e Sultan resisted. Many of these men spent their days in the mountains and their nights at home in their village. As a result, women were left in charge of their households for much of the time, and were sometimes forced to deal directly with Taliban.

### **Hazrat-e Sultan**

The district of Hazrat-e Sultan is so named because of the local shrine dedicated to Hazrat Sultan, considered to be a direct descendant of Hazrat Ali. As such the area is considered to be a holy one.

The primary crops grown in the area are wheat, barley, cumin, clover, alfalfa, millet and sesame, with the district having the highest proportion of land being used for wheat cultivation of any in the province.<sup>12</sup> The Samangan River is dry in the summer, and water is a major issue and source of – currently non-violent – conflict between villages. Traders used to bring raw materials for local women to produce leather and wool goods in their homes, but this practice seems to have diminished.

The primarily Uzbek Sunni Muslim village studied in the area consisted of 91 households with 150 men attending the mosque on a regular basis. Twenty men were in Iran, 15 in Pakistan and seven in Kabul as migrant workers. These men sent remittances to their families through relatives or by other means, attempting to come home regularly to bring food to their families. In practice, a few families had not heard from their sons or husbands in months or years. The village was previously located at the base of a nearby hill, but relocated to be closer to two other Uzbek villages reportedly in a show of solidarity against the Soviets. The ethnic composition of Hazrat-e Sultan District is estimated at Uzbeks (90%), Tajiks (7%) and Pashtuns (3%). In the village in this study, the villagers all speak Uzbek, with most of the men and only a few of the women speaking Dari.

There were three men who had some formal education and no educated women in the village. Most of the participants expressed fondness for the Soviet-backed Najibullah regime that had given them access to primary education, good roads and even electricity. As a result, most of them had a keen interest in educating both boys and girls, and the first girl's school had just been established. Nevertheless,

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<sup>12</sup> UNIDATA Population 1991 Attributes, Samangan Province. Available at: [www.fao.org/afghanistan/Data/Mapsystem/UNIDATA\\_Population\\_1991/att/population\\_dbf5.html](http://www.fao.org/afghanistan/Data/Mapsystem/UNIDATA_Population_1991/att/population_dbf5.html)

at about Grade 2 girls would be expected to finish their education. The major issue in the village was the lack of water.

Afghanaid is engaged with the villagers through the establishment of the Village Organization (VO) through which they organise all community development initiatives, including distribution of seeds, irrigation and health education. The VO was solely constituted of men at the time of the research, as the NGO has had a hard time gaining the permission to establish any group for women. There is a lot of land in the village, but much of it is owned by their Pashtun neighbours and there is a water supply problem so there is difficulty using it. Other aid organisations in the area are Samaritan's Purse and GOAL.

### **Khoram**

The second village was in Khoram District of Samangan Province; about a three and a half hour drive south of Hazrat-e Sultan on a dirt road. The village was comprised of mainly Tajik families. The area has a much higher level of education than Hazrat-e Sultan, and many of the participants in this field site had been schooled to a level of Grade 6 or higher. The village has a school for girls to Grade 6 and for boys to Grade 9. The village and surrounding area have been targeted for aid by several organisations.

There is very little agricultural land, and though the main sources of income were once animal husbandry and agriculture, these have been damaged by drought and war. Many of those displaced migrated to Mazar, and have either not returned or found work as teachers or with NGOs working locally. The crops being grown there now – potatoes, spinach and melons – are grown mostly with the support of Afghanaid. The main issues were lack of electricity and a health clinic and insufficient transportation to Aybek, where many of the villagers work as shopkeepers or day labourers. There are several women representatives in their VOs, as well as in the National Solidarity Programme (NSP) being implemented in the area.

Many UN agencies have provided emergency relief and infrastructure projects in the area. Afghanaid is engaging in a range of community development activities, including the establishment in 2002 of several Women's Resource Centres (WRCs), which engage in skills building activities.

## **Description of methodology**

### ***Partner selection***

For each field study, the researchers chose NGO partners based on their experience of working with communities,<sup>13</sup> their interest in improving their work with women, their capacity to facilitate the research and to advise on security. The researchers aimed to provide NGO partners with insights into appropriate entry points for promoting the increased participation of women in decision making processes that affect their welfare, and the welfare of their families and communities as a whole.

In Samangan, Afghanaid supported the research. They were chosen because of their experience working directly with women from a variety of households in rural and remote parts of Afghanistan, their desire to promote participatory approaches to development and their willingness to provide assistance to the research team.

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<sup>13</sup> For a discussion on "finding community" see Section IV, which challenges that it is possible to identify community per se, but that what should be looked at is people's social networks and solidarity when trying to understand the social context of people's lives that determine gender relations.

**Participant selection**

In the two villages in Samangan, as with the other field studies, the researchers first met with community leaders introduced by Afghanaid staff. Compared to the other field sites in this research, it was particularly difficult to identify participants in Hazrat-e Sultan, where the researchers were told by the NGO that no women would speak with them and all would run away. It was difficult to meet women without the supervision of the *arbab*, who took a keen interest in knowing about the content of each of the interviews. In this regard, the sample of women was more limited than is ideal and essentially limited to those the team was allowed to speak with.<sup>14</sup> This included interviews with women (10), men (3), focus groups with middle-aged married men (1 group, 11 men), young married men (1 group, 10 men) and landless men (1 group, 10 men). The participants in Khoram included women (8) and men (7).

**Research techniques**

The research was carried out by a team of three: one female American team leader with extremely limited Dari; one female Afghan research assistant, with fluent Dari and Pashto; and one male Afghan research assistant, with fluent Hazaragi, Dari and Pashto. None of the team members spoke Uzbeki, and as a result they hired a local woman to translate for a portion of the field work with women. The same team carried out the research for almost all of the case studies.<sup>15</sup> In general, the male assistant held discussions with men and the female assistant held discussions with women, while the team leader alternated between them over the course of the study. The basic methods used in the research in Samangan were as follows:

- **Semi-structured interviews** to gather descriptive information, in participants' own words as much as possible, on individual women's and men's perspectives on their roles and responsibilities and gender relations in their households and communities.
- **Observation** was intended to allow the researchers and participants to slowly familiarise themselves with each other, and to understand more of the context of people's words. The team benefited from spending time in people's homes, in a few cases on a repeat basis.
- **Focus groups** were carried out in Hazrat-e Sultan with young married males, elderly men and landless men. Unfortunately, formal focus groups with the women were not organised because they were not permitted. However, the team held impromptu group interviews: inevitably several women came to see what was going on while engaged with individual interviews. These experiences enabled the researchers to gather more in-depth information with respect to the ideals, rules and norms attached to women's lives and to observe interactions within groups of women and men.

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<sup>14</sup> This is true to a certain extent in the other rural areas as well, though in this case appeared to be much more tightly controlled by the *arbab* rather than only at a household level.

<sup>15</sup> This is with the exception of the study in Robat-e Sangi, Herat where a different national female assisted with the research.

## Section III: Household Decision Making

This study had one primary and one secondary field site, and as such the data on household level concerns, roles and responsibilities are presented here separately. Participants in both settings were asked to tell the researchers about the main issues and problems in their households,<sup>16</sup> how they go about making decisions about these issues, who participates, how they are expected to participate, who makes the final decision and what happens if the decisions are not agreed.

### ***Hazrat-e Sultan***

This was the most sensitive of the field sites of the research project with regards to outsiders having contact with the women of the village and to discussing their roles and responsibilities at the household and village levels. This sensitivity, likely due in part to local custom, appeared compounded by the local experience of conflict and the villagers' status as an ethnic minority. These factors combined to create a largely well-founded suspicion of outsiders. A challenge for Afghanistan aid staff working in the area, this dynamic was also a challenge for research that attempts to have a better understanding of gender relations. At the same time the experience gave the researchers insights into the dilemma of how to reach women in a conservative area, which is prevalent throughout most parts of Afghanistan – across ethnic groups and regions.

The participants in the field site in Hazrat-e Sultan were primarily Uzbek. The village was said to be made up of three family groups (*khel*), including one Uzbek, one Tajik and one “Afghan”<sup>17</sup> lineage. The participants represented the village as Uzbek, however, and expressed solidarity with other villagers on this basis.<sup>18</sup> This representation is likely to have an influence on the ways in which both women and men engage with outsiders, especially when they are not Uzbek. It is always important to keep in mind the reasons that people may represent themselves, their households and their community in certain ways and not assume that it is a complete picture of their lives. Because of the tentative attitudes in this village to outsiders, it is even more important to take this into account and to recognise that while women are not able to easily speak with outsiders – which hinders their participation in development efforts as currently conceived – they likely have greater participation in household decisions than this research is able to show.

### ***Khoram***

The men and women of this area were generally familiar with the language of rights and participation as a function of their experience of war and migration, which exposed many of the villagers and their relatives to other cultural practices, access to education and contact with a variety of aid organisations. As a result, many prided themselves on having progressive attitudes towards women's participation in public life<sup>19</sup> as compared to some other parts of Samangan, and

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<sup>16</sup> This paper uses the definition of household that has been used in some of AREU's livelihoods work, and other anthropological works which considers a unit of people who eat from the same cooking pot as a household. However, in many cases several different households live very close together.

<sup>17</sup> In this context, it is likely that “Afghan” refers to Pashtuns.

<sup>18</sup> Afghanistan researcher Oliver Roy notes an increase in this expression of solidarity among Uzbeks as a function of years of conflict and exposure to other ethnic groups, relating it to the experience of Hazaras, another minority ethnic group in Afghanistan. Roy, O. 1990. “Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan,” *Cambridge Middle East Library*. 8(2).

<sup>19</sup> The “private” sphere is often referred to as women's domain with “public” space being considered the domain of men. This distinction has lent itself to simplified understandings of access to decision making processes. It is a somewhat artificial divide that is determined by that which is visible when decisions that affect a community are made, but that does not take into account the relationship between how decisions are made at a household level and what gets decided on at a community level. Also as Grima points out in her work on Pashtuns, every

Afghanistan in general. Khoram, and this village in particular, has a higher level of education as compared to Hazrat-e Sultan, and local Afghanaid staff consider it to be a far easier place to work. For instance, there are three women's centres within a relatively small radius of this village, including one situated within it, whereas in Hazrat-e Sultan the establishment of such centres has not even been attempted. However, as discussed below, this indicates an openness towards women participating in income generation activities – which is also encouraged in Hazrat-e Sultan – to which their role in decision making does not appear to be linked.

## **The household as an institution: gender roles, responsibilities and norms**

A gendered analysis of decision making looks at the institutions that determine what issues are to be considered important, whether these will be permitted to be discussed, whether and when decisions will be made, as well as who gets to participate in, influence and control decisions. This analysis necessarily begins at the household level, because of its “central role in enabling, constraining and differentiating its members’ participation in the economy and society at large.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, this is an important level of analysis for development planning and practice, which must be linked with the community level and its institutions: they determine which women and men will be able to participate in development activities.

The households in both sites in this study were made up, at their largest, of extended family units, including paternal mothers and fathers, married sons, unmarried children, daughters-in-law, and unmarried daughters as well as female-headed households.

### ***Hazrat-e Sultan***

#### ***Women***

The work of women versus men was represented along the lines of the traditional public/private divide: “women are responsible for work inside the house, and the work outside is the men’s.” This includes teaching the children manners and proper behaviour. There was a sense of dependence of women on the men, and many of them told the researchers that “without our husbands, we cannot do anything.” Women were engaged in agricultural work, however, and could be seen every day working in the fields alongside their male family members or other women. Their work outside of the house is integrally linked to the men’s, since their husbands secure the work through the male elders in their households who liaise with landholders. The women usually go to work in the fields only when their husbands do. They are also responsible for water collection, when their children are busy with other work.

#### ***Men***

Men’s responsibilities “outside the house” includes providing food and clothing for their families, finding work to support this, going to the bazaar to purchase household items, bringing firewood and working in the fields. They also have responsibilities inside the household, including ensuring that there is “no fighting” among household members. In a focus group of landless men, one man put it this

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interaction with another individual is determined by established expectations in that kinship tie, giving different meaning to the concept of “private” depending on socio-cultural context. Grima, B. 1992. *The Performance of Emotion Among Paxtun Women: The misfortunes which have befallen me*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 71.

<sup>20</sup> Kabeer, op cit.

way: “you provide this and then you get good service in the house” while yet another felt “we are poor and we should work together, otherwise we will go hungry. Men cannot work alone.” This expression was voiced only among these poorer men, with the distinction between roles and responsibilities made much clearer among the households with some land. For instance, the *arbab*’s family was able to hire other villagers to do both their agricultural and household work. The support of these villagers, both male and female, made it much easier for his wife to engage only in household work that took place in private, allowing her to maintain *purdah* norms.

### **Children**

As in many parts of Afghanistan, one is considered a child essentially until married, and status increases through bearing children. The balance of power and responsibility between elders and younger household members changes over time. The divisions of power and authority in this village according to age were stark in comparison to the other field sites in this study, including in Khoram. Most of the younger men – particularly those without education – behaved modestly and were embarrassed to share their own ideas even when married and in their twenties. This was exhibited in one focus group, where a few of the young men were unmarried. One younger man summed up his responsibilities in the household by saying:

*The responsibility of the father is to give orders and my responsibility is to obey those orders. If he says to bring the water, I should bring the water. If he says to bring the tea, I should bring the tea; whatever he says I should obey.*

These roles will likely change over time: most of these men have not had any formal education while most of the younger children now attend school. There was a sense that children who are educated have a responsibility to help their families, as well as their society. It was seen that the benefit of the children’s education is to “earn salary and to give the benefit of aid to their parents.”

### **Khoram**

#### **Women**

The situation of women and their roles and responsibilities were more varied in Khoram, where some of the women had formal education. As a result, some women earned income through participation in work outside of the household – primarily as teachers – and were not so dependent on their husbands’ work.<sup>21</sup> In one household, a man with two wives even told the researchers that his house had gender equality because while one wife worked as a teacher well within the realm of public work, his other wife worked solely in the household engaged in reproductive work.

Women’s responsibilities for agricultural work included growing fruit, with a distinct distribution of labour between men and women related to its cultivation. For instance, women are responsible for melon cultivation and collecting the fruit when it is low to the ground, whereas men collect it when it grows higher up in the tree. They also help their husbands to collect firewood in the mountains.

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<sup>21</sup> While in Hazrat-e Sultan there were no educated women, which meant there were no female teachers for the girls, creating a barrier to girls continued education past a certain age. In Khoram, while the pressure to marry young and discontinue school is present, it is less of a pressure because there were several female teachers.



**Men**

Many of the men of this village worked outside of the village as day labourers and shop-owners in Aybek, as the animal husbandry and agricultural work that was once the backbone of the economy was no longer sustainable. Men's responsibilities also included going to the bazaar to purchase household items, and collecting firewood in the mountains. One man, a Sayed (descendent of the Prophet Mohammad) noted that he sometimes helps his wife to cook, and sometimes cooks himself.

**Realities of household life: gender, power and participation in decision making**

The data in this section are presented as a comparison between these two villages. There were some strong differences between the two villages in the ways the men and women expressed their own participation in household decision making. This is impacting heavily on the perceived ability of NGOs to work with women in Hazrat-e Sultan, as well as on assumptions about what is being achieved in Khoram.

While in Hazrat-e Sultan, the very act of discussing women's and men's roles in the household was sensitive, in Khoram there was a broader awareness of the concept of women's rights and interaction with NGOs, which influenced how the villagers spoke to the researchers about decision making. In Khoram this did not necessarily relate to an actual belief in those concepts, but was linked to their pride in the level of education many of them had been able to achieve.

**Marriage**

In both Hazrat-e Sultan and Khoram the process of arranging and deciding about a marriage is one of consensus building, among members of the household of both the boy and girl and elder extended family members. Even though the decisions are ultimately made by the fathers of the households in this study, each of the members has interest in the choice of marriage partners of their relatives, and in some cases each had a role to play in the decision.

Generally, if a boy knows who he wants to marry, he will communicate his intent to one of his relatives, for instance his elder sister. She will then relay this information to their mother, who will then decide whether or how to raise the subject with her husband. It is the norm for the mother, father and eldest siblings to discuss the issue together. According to the VO leader in Hazrat-e Sultan, a girl has a lot of influence over her marriage: if a girl does not agree, her family will try to convince her and if she still disagrees, the boy himself will try. If she disagrees after this, there will be no marriage. However, given strong cultural norms and family expectations that make it undesirable to disagree with one's elderly family members, this scenario is not very likely. The subject of marriage decision making was discussed in most of the interviews, yet particular examples such as the one described by the VO leaders did not come up.

The marriage of the *arbab* of Hazrat-e Sultan and his wife, Suraiya<sup>22</sup> — daughter of the previous *arbab* — is illustrative of the social and political stakes involved in a marriage between two high-status families as well as of the interests of various family members. The perspectives of the couple as well as the mother of the *arbab* were gathered. He described their union as a love marriage, because he liked his cousin and pursued the marriage himself. This is within the cultural norms by which most of the villagers lived, as an ideal marriage is between first cousins. As is the

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<sup>22</sup> Names of the participants have been changed.

norm, the young man was not able to approach his father directly and had to first indicate to his mother that he wanted to marry the girl. His mother relayed that she was happy with the marriage because “there was someone to bake bread and clean for me” and she advocated the marriage to her husband. Clearly this does not express the full range of considerations in the marriage. The elder sister of the groom also had a say, and the mother relayed that if she did not like her “the marriage never would have happened, because she is the eldest.”

In this case Suraiya’s own mother asked her if she was happy with the marriage, and she with her father – the *arbab* at the time – agreed “because he was a good man and paid a large brideprice.” His family collected a lot of relatives and village elders and informed them of his desire to marry the girl, and his uncle’s daughter and all the elders went to her house and her family agreed. This is an example of the ways in which families consolidate power through marriage, and how the different motives of family members can factor into marriage decisions.

In Khoram, the practice is similar, but due to the higher level of education the attitudes about proper marriage decision making were more similar to those found in the urban context of Mazar. This included the observation that girls who marry young are not able to participate in the decisions because they are too young and are uneducated. One man with a third grade education noted that:

*...when you are getting married, there should be some understanding between the boy and the girl otherwise you will not have a successful life. My wife and I had some understanding before we got married, she loved me and I loved her too. I told my relatives this, so they went to my father-in-law, he agreed and we got married.*

Another man with relatives living abroad relayed that he had “some relations” with his cousin before they were married, and as this was an acceptable union his father and her father (brothers) agreed with each other to the marriage. In this case, the man did not even approach his own father – and yet his will became part of the decision making process. Another said “I was married to my cousin through an arranged marriage of my father’s choice. I agreed with that decision because at that time I didn’t have any opinions.”

### **Expenditure**

The second area of household decision making widely discussed was expenditures, related to household and extra-household expenses. In Hazrat-e Sultan the eldest women in the household are said to have the most authority over decisions about how money is spend on household items. In a related discussion, the *arbab* noted in front of his mother “everything she says, I will do it” to which she replied “whatever I say, he will do it.” There is great respect for the elders in each of the households, but as they get older and are less able to fully participate in decisions, their actual authority can decrease. The decision making processes appeared tightly controlled by the men in each of the households, despite the rhetorical control of the mothers-in-law.

The decision about giving of gifts, on the other hand, is firmly among the responsibilities of the eldest women in the household, with younger women sitting together to make suggestions about what should be bought for whom.

In Khoram, participants all spoke about the need for greater income in order to pay for expenditures related to the household for which the women had control as well

as related to brideprice for the marriage of their children. This is a large expenditure for all but those villagers who identified themselves as Sayeds, and is controlled by the elder male in the household (or elder female in case of their absence) with the “participation” of the rest of the family members. In most cases this means that it is an issue discussed in front of the whole family, but younger family members do not have much say in the final outcome.

### ***Distribution of work***

The site in Hazrat-e Sultan is an agricultural village, with most of its residents working on someone else’s land, or if they are landowners, hiring day labourers to work on their land. The distribution of work in each household is decided over dinner, when the members of the household are present. The final decision is made by the head of the household, who is responsible for knowing what work there is and where it needs to be done. The researchers witnessed many women in the *zira* (cumin) fields every day, always accompanied by their husbands. A group of women that had converged in Zia Jan’s house in order to visit and see what excitement there was in her house, relayed that if your husband is a farmer, you are expected to go with him, but if he is not you are not allowed to go. The reason for this is that the landowners – Pashtuns with which the village had conflict with from time to time – are considered outsiders, even though their village is nearby. As a result, women were to “hide” from them.

The decisions about work can also transcend households, for instance, with Zia Jan asking the opinion of her sister (who lives in a separate household) as well as the permission of her husband to work with the research team as a translator. Regardless of the importance of gaining family members’ opinions on such important matters, she told the researchers that she had asked her husband first: “Why would I ask my sister first when she does not live with us?”

The situation was quite different in the few female-headed households. For instance, one woman inherited her own land, and retained it since she was a widow and her brothers had deceased. Now all of her sons come to her to see if they should work. Only one of her sons lives in his own household, and is the only one who does not need his mother’s permission in order to decide which work to do. In the household of the young teacher, one of the more educated members of the village, the decision of who will engage in which work the next day is made nightly. They have their own rain-fed land where they grow wheat, and his parents discuss together who should work the land. His father makes the decision and discusses it with his mother, but if she disagrees they must convince each other that their perspective is correct. In this example, he says sometimes the issue is not resolved so easily, and they will fight with each other. In these cases, the children also have a role in resolving the conflict by convincing them of one side or the other.

Generally though, for the women in Hazrat-e Sultan, there is no option but to take part in the work of their husbands and the consequences for not addressing these responsibilities was violence. Several women said that “If I do not go to the fields, my husband will beat me” indicating an extremely limited role in decision making about which types of work to engage in. This is partly indicative of the limited livelihoods options available to villagers, as well as of local gender norms around roles and responsibilities and consequences of non-adherence.

***Disputes***

In general in most communities in Afghanistan, any conflicts or disputes between family members are to be handled privately. It is generally considered to be dishonourable for such disputes to enter the public domain. The case in Appendix 1 is nevertheless illustrative of the type of conflicts that may exist in the village in Hazrat-e Sultan, and is unique because of the way in which both family members involved sought justice outside of their family and even the village itself. In contrast to the urban study in Mazar, for instance, there was less conflict reported between mothers-in-law and “strangers” to the household; this is likely because of the greater number of marriages between non-family members in the urban study. In this study, family members are familiar with each other beforehand and there is likely more common understanding between families about acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.

## Section IV: Community Level Decision Making

### Finding “community”

As discussed in the other reports for this research project,<sup>23</sup> the term “community” is used in many different ways in reconstruction and development efforts in Afghanistan today. Yet it is a loose and somewhat subjective concept, as has been pointed out by researchers like Monsutti and Glatzer on various ethnic groups and regions of Afghanistan, who acknowledge the existence of multiple and sometimes overlapping forms of solidarity (lineages, tribal groups, hamlets, *manteqa*, etc).

Nevertheless, many of the projects related to community development both in Samangan and other rural and urban areas focus more on addressing *technical* development issues rather than *social and political* development issues. This is related to donor-driven pressures to achieve quick-impact results with some evidence of the “participation” of local people, as well as demands by people for the vast amounts of post-conflict aid they have heard about to reach them sooner rather than later. Further, in an insecure environment where gaining the trust of local people can be a real challenge, as illustrated in Hazrat-e Sultan, even with long-term visions, NGOs are seeking to gain short-term buy-in to their presence.

For these reasons among others, the unit of aid targeting is often determined by physical boundaries rather than by the likelihood that the people within those boundaries trust and will cooperate with each other. It is often assumed that these physical boundaries are indicative of the existence – or are the appropriate site for the development – of social bonds that foster the realisation of collective ideas of people’s well being. It also is often assumed that this can be fostered over time by the establishment of new institutions that require the presence of all villagers or neighbourhood residents, including those formerly marginalised from community level decision making.

These issues are significant for the topic of gender and local level decision making because women are usually a key marginalised group, and if a lack of solidarity among neighbours exists and affects many of the men it will certainly also affect their female relatives. This prevents people from working together, especially where there are strict *purdah* norms that do not allow women to interact with outsiders.

The implications of lack of trust among villagers, and especially of outsiders, were evident in the barriers women had to gathering information about village level development issues. By comparison, in Khoram women had far more information about village level activities and there appeared to be far more willingness of villagers to cooperate with each other across different social groups. At the time of this research, this village was already being mobilised for the NSP and had elected female and male representatives. Meanwhile the village in Hazrat-e Sultan was just beginning to receive information about the NSP, and had not yet dealt with its requirements related to women’s involvement. A follow-up study could look at the dynamics before and after the implementation of the NSP in order to better understand how some of the underlying power dynamics, sources of solidarity and difference affect the overall development work.

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<sup>23</sup> See Wakefield, S. 2004. *Gender and Local Level Decision Making: Findings from a Case Study in Panjao*. Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit and Wakefield, S. 2004. *Gender and Local Level Decision Making: Findings from a Case Study in Mazar-e Sharif*. Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit.

Even more complex is the reality that even within households, different members' interests may not be the same. While having many interests in common, the idea that households or family units are units of trust and that they will have *all* the same interests is a myth contrary to assumptions by development actors that women's interests are no different than men's. A family feud in Hazrat-e Sultan displays the complexity of finding where the solidarity and social ties that make up a community lie (see Appendix 1). In a patriarchal society where brothers may compete for the same family land and other assets, trust can certainly not be assumed.

This does not mean that support to foster cooperation is impossible. In fact, aid organisations may learn about how communities operate by taking into account the areas where it is felt that some level of cooperation among – and between – villages already exists. For instance, the researchers were given an example of water management and the relatively peaceful understanding between the four villages on its use. Another example of villagers' willingness to work together – albeit in a non-participatory manner – is the example of how four village males sat together to elect the next representative to the NSP "*shura*" (see below).

Unfortunately, women's interests within this complicated web of relations and alliances are usually buried. The female participants in Hazrat-e Sultan were the least aware of any of the women in this study of village level processes, at least in terms of what they were willing to communicate to the research team.

## Community issues

The gendered analysis of decision making in the study villages looked first at the household in order to illustrate some of the rules and norms that operate in the "private" sphere. Considering the importance placed on family honour in Afghan cultures and societies, and on women's role in upholding it through *pardah*, the household is an important site for controlling women's behaviour. The household rules and norms therefore influence heavily how men and women are able to participate in, influence and control decisions at the village level. This analysis contributes to understanding how gender norms within the household may constrain certain women and men from participating in, influencing and controlling decisions, including those at the village level.

The issue raised time and time again in Hazrat was the lack of clean water in the village, and the distribution of water within and between villages. This village was one of the lowest on the river, and as such this was the major issue. Another issue was the lack of a proper building for the boys' and girls' schools. In Khoram, the issues were reflective of an area with greater wealth although less arable land. These were the lack of electricity, health clinic and transportation to Aybek and Mazar, where many of the men worked on a daily basis.

## Village leadership and institutions: a gender perspective

Both of the villages in this study had a traditional *shura* functioning, as well as a VO established by Afghanaid. The VO is Afghanaid's primary mechanism for engaging with rural communities, and is seen as a way to involve villagers in more sustainable and effective decision making processes. The VO is an approach taken by many NGOs that is seen to build community ownership over the development process. They have fairly regular meetings, led by NGO staff, and a relatively

formal structure that includes a representative, an assistant and a writer to record the proceedings in the meetings. Meetings include all male members of the village. In Hazrat-e Sultan, these were held in the *arbab*'s house.

In the post-conflict environment, the residents of both villages expressed high hopes for peace and stability and rated President Karzai high for his part in creating an improved environment in their areas. The President is known to be popular in the province in general, and he was often cited as a good leader. The characteristics of a good leader were articulated by one villager in Hazrat-e Sultan as follows:

*Good leaders should be educated, uneducated men cannot bring people together – he should have a good manner, know how to deal with people, if they don't they can't be good shura leaders.*

This attitude is also relevant to the local leadership in Hazrat-e Sultan, but people were more hesitant to discuss local leadership – perhaps because of the traditional power dynamics that enable perspectives of landholding minority to emerge more readily than those of the majority. In both sites, people stressed the importance of education and “knowing how to talk” to outsiders as a prerequisite for good local level leadership. In Hazrat-e Sultan, however, even the *arbab* recognises a change in local power dynamics but retains some level of respect because of his role in defeating the Taliban, as well as authority and power because he is still the largest landholder in the village.

More generally, in both villages the role of the elders remained strong, with villagers always saying that any decisions affecting the village as a whole are made by the elders, sometimes mentioning the representative. One difference between Hazrat-e Sultan and Khoram was that in the latter, the role of the *mullah* was mentioned as well. This *mullah* was educated, and in fact never studied in a *madrassa*. In addition to Islamic books, he even said that he also taught anthropology and social studies.

It is a challenge to find or create opportunities for new forms of leadership and institutions, with new rules of operation to emerge in a post-conflict environment. It is a long-term process, and it is arguable whether aid interventions are actually able to contribute to processes which evidence in other contexts has shown are rarely along linear paths with clear causality. In the case of Hazrat-e Sultan, Afghanistanaid has found it difficult to engage with a group of people that is distrustful of external agents and any infiltration of foreign ideas into their village. This is especially challenging, as Afghanistanaid is an organisation that aims to promote more equitable participation and benefits from local level decision making processes, which is at odds with the way the village currently functions.

One notable change is with the emergence of leadership of a younger man, who obtained some education during his time in Iran and Pakistan during the war. This young man enjoys respect and a role in village decision making that no other young male enjoys. But women have very little access to any of these men, except through their husbands. This was illustrated to the research team while trying to identify a local translator for the research, who was linked to the *arbab* through her husband who worked for him as a day labourer. Local power dynamics and norms dictate how people of different status communicate with one another, and that as a result the interests of women are unlikely to surface.

The way in which the *arbab* obtained his status in the village indicates some of the challenges with introducing change to leadership in this village, as is the case in so many parts of the country. The *arbab* was from a rich landowning family of *jihadis*. His father and three brothers from his blood mother (he also had a co-mother) were all martyred in the war against the Soviets. He admitted his own role in human rights violations during this period. His father was not the *arbab*, but the assumed successor – the *arbab*'s son – was killed in unspecified circumstances, and the current *arbab* took his place when he helped to force the Taliban out of the area. He disclosed that the basis of his status was his ownership of land and his subsequent ability to provide work for the villagers.

On the other hand, he also admits that his current status is very different from that of the past, because of the end of conflict and the emergence of aid which is obtained according to a different set of rules. The new system requires communication skills that only those with more education are expected to have, hence the designation of the elder village teacher as the head of the VO and the increased status of the young teacher. In Khoram, women have been able to obtain representative status with the VO in part because of their education.

The research suggests that there is a strong relationship between the VO and the traditional *shuras*, both in terms of local power dynamics as well as notions of what good the VO can bring to the population. In other words, while there is a new system being put in place that require leaders to have new skill sets, the result they are looking for requires access to resources only available from the central government, and/or foreigners. One implication is that there may not be much interest locally in changing the existing power dynamics to be in line with principles of participation and equity that are within Afghanistan's mandate.

*The VO came in and now I cannot control and solve all of the problems. But the work is shared between us. I do not know why but the system was destroyed and people do their own work now. There is an economic problem now and everyone wants to have money. In the past there was no control from the central government, but now there is and the control of the arbab has finished.*

He continued, "I will help the NSP *shura*, but will not be a representative, because I do not want the responsibility." The role of the *arbab* illustrates the complexity of representation in even a small village. While some people support the *arbab* for his role in fighting the Taliban, his role in human rights violations during *jihad* and his corrupt practices, as well as his inability to provide for other villagers, merge to create perceptions of a man with an eroded but not altogether incomplete power base. The *arbab* told the researchers he settled land disputes in the past, but when the police came a person would give him money and he would split it – half for himself and half for the police. He said the police would just "change the map so the person who paid the bribe could prove his own land ownership." He appeared to still have some level of control over the management of resources, including water. The villagers had a system whereby a man is chosen to handle distribution of water between villages (*chagbashi*), a traditional and locally accepted system of water management.

Interestingly, though the NSP "*shura*" had not yet been established and little induction of the village had been made to the programme at this point, the *arbab* and a few of the other villagers with decision making authority had a clear idea of how it would be run, seemingly based closely on the existing *shura*. When they



learned that the NSP would be establishing yet another new decision making institution in their area the process was described as follows:

*The elders said “you three are like brothers, so we cannot decide.” So the VO leader, the principal of the boys’ school and I sat together and had an election. We wrote down our choice and put it on the ground. One person looked at them and it was the principal that was chosen. We did this in the mosque.*

As described, this process of leadership selection shows some signs of change, and an eagerness of those villagers with more power and authority to operate in a more “democratic” fashion amongst themselves. The absence of the *arbab* in this election was notable. The absence of any consideration of the role of women, and involvement from the poorer landless and uneducated members of the village, is also notable and the assumptions about leadership within this context should be understood.

By contrast in Khoram the villagers had selected a female representative as well as a male representative to the NSP “*shura*”. The woman was an educated woman, and teacher in the village school. This is a potential opening for the greater participation of women in the VO, as it is more likely that they will be given permission to participate with the female leader than without. Nevertheless, challenges remain to the quality of her participation. As one village woman put it:

*The main issues in our village are electricity, and the elders and the mullah make decisions on this with the participation of the villagers. The women do not have any control in village level decisions. Even the head of the VO, who is a woman, does not have any control. It is only the men who make decisions.*

This observation has implications for Afghanistan’s work with local women and men, such women are to be truly considered representatives.

## Decisions and “non-decisions,” informal influence, power and participation

As stated earlier, Hazrat-e Sultan was the most conservative of the field sites in the research project with respect to women’s role in public life and decision making. Given the relatively firm leadership structure of the village, and the lack of many challenges to that system, there was not much room for women’s participation. As stated earlier, the withholding of information about anything going on at the village level from the women was strong.

This was also the only site where the facilitating partner had not yet made any attempts to engage the women because of the perceived and real local resistance to including women. This was partly out of fear of backlash in this community, where it was expected that women would run away as soon as they saw this research team because of their fear of outsiders. And yet however difficult it was to engage with the women of Hazrat-e Sultan, this did not happen. The researchers were surprised to hear on the first day in the village from the *arbab* that: “you have not seen the women. We have equal rights here. If you meet the men, you must also meet the women.” In practice though there needs to be much greater level of trust between villagers, as well as between the villages and the NGO in order for in roads to women’s participation to begin for real.

It was clear that there was some exchange of information that took place as part of the informal gatherings of women (see Section V). It was said that “the representative collects the information and tells the men and they come and tell their wives.” This was mainly limited to information about distribution of work from aid organisations (i.e. a road building project) and not regarding issues for which decisions will be made.

## Section V: Themes in Gender and Local Level Decision Making

### Social networks and support

Despite the fact that women in Hazrat-e Sultan had some of the least outward roles in participation in village level decision making, they did appear to have social networks which several of them described as being enjoyable. These social networks are known in many cases to be important for establishing the conditions on which development is based.<sup>24</sup> Similar to findings from other village life, these were primarily around productive activities for social events, such as *namad* (felted woollen rug) making and embroidery for weddings, which are made by reciprocal arrangements of different sorts between villages. This included providing tea and bread (*naan*) for women who assist, or even some amount of money. They are expected to return this assistance when they need it themselves. The woman who most often drew upon the support of other women was the wife of the *arbab*. As power in the village is determined partly by the ability to provide work for other villagers, this role extends for the wife of the wealthy individual as she is also able to provide this for other village women.

The researchers met several women who had participated in making *namads* at the *arbab's* house and enjoy meeting there as it provides them an opportunity to socialise. The gathering of women was a sensitive topic among the men, but in an impromptu gathering of women in Zia Jan's house they openly described the benefits of spending time together around the making of felt carpets (*namads*):

*We enjoy making namads because we sit with other women. How can we spend our days otherwise?*

*The same women always come to make namads, they are neighbours. If I want to make one I call them and pay them money. If I don't have money then I will go and help them with theirs later.*

These same women vehemently denied ever contacting or requesting assistance from women of even the nearest villages. One woman said, "Noo! The women of this village don't go to that village and we don't go there." Another added, "If I go to that village, my husband will kill me" to which the five other women in the room nodded. They said further "we don't need to rent women from other villages, we have our own neighbours to help us so we don't need to go to the next village."

These visits were described by several of the women as evidence of good relations with their neighbours, and the groups that came together were not necessarily related to each other. The visits include discussions about the problems of individual women, including financial problems. In these cases they would try to help with money, and if they do not have any, they related that at least they could provide their sympathy.

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<sup>24</sup> Putnam's work also discusses "social capital", a term that has been widely discussed, but generally "refers to features of social organization, such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit." He says that this contributes to norms of reciprocity and social trust; facilitates coordination and removes some of the barriers to collective action. Over time, these networks are associated with past successes in collaboration, can serve as a "cultural template" for future collaborations and strengthen the sense of "we" over "I", eventually contributing to the willingness of people to work together. Putnam, R. 1995. "Bowling Alone." *Journal of Democracy*, 6(1): 65-78.

Other spaces of women's gathering include for collecting *zira* and water, primarily as a function of local *purdah* norms that require women to have some form of *maharam* when going outside (see section below on being "free" to move). One woman described these activities as having another benefit: "a lot of women come together and aside from work they also have some fun and laughter." This characterisation of work as a source of entertainment was an interesting finding not expressed to the researchers in quite the same way in other field sites. The ensuing discussion among this group of women on the aid distribution to the villagers showed that there is some exchange of information between women through these social networks.

A longer term study of this complex village would illustrate the basis of these networks and solidarity more clearly.

### Being "free" to move

In most parts of Afghanistan, women's freedom of mobility and any resulting public exposure is limited to some extent by local *purdah* norms.<sup>25</sup> This varies between and among ethnic groups, regions and lineages, neighbourhoods and villages. While the *arbab* watched closely over the information his wife provided, he also wanted the women in his household (including his mother, wife and sister) to speak with foreigners because in the past they had run away and "I want for them to have courage and feel confident to meet the foreigners." This could be for a variety of reasons, including the idea that this exposure might increase the family status, access to aid and/or a genuine desire for the women to be more courageous. Another reason could be the exposure that some of the men have had to information about human rights, equal rights and democracy which had been heavily promoted around this time in advance of the elections. Yet the men the researchers spoke with had no intention of telling their wives about the elections, or letting them vote at this point in time.

The norms around *purdah* and resulting freedom of movement were strict in this village although as usually is the case, there were variations depending on the levels of wealth of the households. Zia Jan for instance, who was outside building a wall around her own house when the researchers arrived, was able to travel around the village without a *maharam*. All of the women would only wear the *borqah* to leave the village, but within the village the women knew the routes to take to avoid interactions with other men. The women had a way of travelling through the village using paths that went between compounds which could not be seen from the main road. The wife of the *arbab* was one of the most restricted women in the village, and most of the other women would come to her house if they could in order to help with *namad*, *gilem* or shawl weaving in exchange for some pay, tea and/or *naan*.

The disagreement between the *arbab* and his wife on one occasion was one of the more interesting reflections on women's mobility:

*Arbab: During the Taliban women could not go outside and visit the other villages. Now they have freedom.*

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<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Boesen, I.W. 1981. "Women, Honour and Love: Some aspects of the Pashtun woman's life in Eastern Afghanistan." *Afghanistan Journal*. 7(2):50-59 and Hafizullah, E. 2002. *Politics of Development and Women in Afghanistan*. Karachi, Pakistan: Royal Book Company.

Suraiya: (smiling) *How do we have freedom?! There is no transportation, no car here. Where can we go? We are just sitting here.*

Arbab: *You have the freedom to go to the shura, to see the doctor...Which kind of freedom do you want? You cannot have the freedom to leave your husband.*

Researcher: *Which kind of freedom do you want?*

Suraiya: *Freedom means to be like a car. To go from one city to the next and have picnics along the way.*

Arbab: (to his wife and daughters) *You should go to school. Then you can get jobs and buy yourselves a car and you can go anywhere you want.*

For the women who are newly married, there is an understanding that they are not permitted to go outside. When the researchers tried to speak with the sister of one of the participants, and she only smiled but did not respond, her sister said “She only married six months ago and she is shy.” She explained that women will hide themselves from their father- and brother-in-law until they have several children:

*When my husband brought me to Tashqurghan, I didn't go outside for two years. Because I was a new bride, my mother-in-law said “it is shameful for you to go outside.” This is our tradition, before you have four or five children you have to hide.*

There was a common understanding among the women that if they do not cover themselves properly they would be beaten, and they expressed limitations on visiting even their own families in Hazrat-e Sultan centre, only a few kilometres away. They had permission to go work on the land their gardens. When asked about the seeming contradiction between being able to work in the fields in full view and not to visit, one woman said, “If I do not go and work on the land or in the garden, my husband will beat me” and when questioned further she said that her husband’s justification was that “it is my wish, I am a man and I have the authority.” In a focus group of middle-aged married men, it was said that when the men go out to work, if a woman needs to go and collect water, she must find a *maharam* (cousin, uncle or elder neighbour). Or if the men are in the fields, she can go with a group of five or six women. When asked why she should go with others, the man said:

*If women go in a group, they do not need a maharam. They will become a strong line and if someone tries to talk to them they can form one big mouth.*

## Gendered knowledge

There was a shifting of emphasis on education and new forms of knowledge in Hazrat-e Sultan linked to the experience of education the villagers had during the Najibullah government, the subsequent loss of it, and the experience of a few of the villagers in refugee camps and living in Iran and Pakistan. In Khoram, some had relatives living in Europe. These influences have contributed to a greater emphasis on education and requirements that new leaders must have some education. When the researchers arrived in the first village looking for a woman who could assist with translation into Uzbek, the researchers were immediately led to the four females “with some knowledge” between the villages adjacent to their own. These

included two unmarried sisters from an adjacent village who learned Farsi while in Iran and had just returned to the area with their parents; an elderly woman who had gone through training to do injections against tuberculosis; and Zia Jan, who had lived in Tajik-dominated Tashqurghan with her husband and learned Dari. In short, all of the women considered to have any knowledge had been outside of the village and experienced not only formal education or training, but new experiences that many of the men lacked themselves.

#### Box 1: A translator's story

Zia Jan was introduced to the research team as a native Uzbek speaker who also spoke Farsi. The first day the team met her, she immediately came to the edge of her property to say hello. She did not cover her face and her hair was lightly covered. She smiled openly and began speaking in Farsi. She agreed to translate for the team with the permission of her husband, and to start two days later. When the researchers went back, they sat with her and her sister to practice translation. They explained the project to her, and a few simple things she would need to translate for participants. She found it extremely difficult, and finally said in frustration:

*I was always in the house in Tashqurghan and never went outside. If I needed to go to the doctor, my husband would bring me. If I needed to go to see my relatives, my husband would bring me. How can I remember anything you say?*

When the researchers attempted to continue and give encouragement, she repeated her assertion and said “the women in the village will be too afraid to talk to you. They will not have enough courage and will be afraid of you.”

While she was subsequently able to translate, this example illustrates the challenges for even women considered to have some knowledge, when they lack confidence which needs to be overcome. This is particularly true where there is a lack of role models within the village, or where those role models do emphasise the differences between them rather than encouraging them. This risks their further disempowerment, and should be avoided.

The same was true for men. Those men who had stayed in the village or in Afghanistan during the war were considered to have no knowledge. Yet there was one young teacher who had been to Pakistan and Iran and had also gone through an agricultural training organised by Afghanaid who was considered knowledgeable. But in the focus group with young men, the VO leader who was sitting in interjected:

*They are not educated and don't know anything. They were young when the war started. During the last three years, people are going to school.*

There was a strong emphasis among the male participants on “learning to talk” and the idea that new forms of communication were needed to deal with a post-conflict environment where education was valued more than arms. The young men said “education is important because then we can sit and talk properly” and:

*We hope that children will be doctors or teachers...for themselves...in Afghanistan there are lots of jobs for educated people, but not enough people to fill those positions. If we study hard, these posts are waiting for us. If your boys become educated they can do better to solve all of our problems.*

The status of the men and women with a bit of formal or informal education does indicate some of the gendered aspects of knowledge acquisition, as well as the perceptions of those individuals considered to “have knowledge.” The formal education has provided some status, which is evidenced in their ability to communicate with outsiders and provide some assistance to the locals. The young teacher relayed to us that he could tell that the elders respected him:

*I have been to other countries and people respect me. They do not say that they respect me, but they show it in their gestures. They do not want to*

*tell me in front of me. When I go to the meetings or the shop, they sit me in the best seat in the room and if there is a disagreement they ask my opinion and when I give it to them they say that I am correct. The elders also come to ask me my opinion. I went to an Afghanaid seminar on agriculture, and when the people have a question about agriculture they come to me. I have a book, so I look up the answer to the problem in the book and make a suggestion to the men. There are also some young people that ask questions of me.*

In a nearby Uzbek village, the one woman who spoke some Farsi acted as the representative of the group, and yet she had absolutely no authority over them and the women were complaining that she was not saying what they wanted her to say.

The status of representative gained by those with some level of education, therefore, is a new one. However, for the women the rigidity of local cultural and gender norms did not translate into greater roles in village level decision making whereas for the men it has. It is an example of how women's roles may change vis-a-vis their new experiences and the openings sometimes provided by conflict and post-conflict environments, but also how these are not easily altered. Indeed, in some cases backlash may ensue.

## External agents

In the context of this study, external agents range from the current and past governments and their representatives to the NGOs, and on to this research team. These may have both positive and negative effects for the participation of women and other marginalised groups in village life and decision making. Some examples have been provided earlier in this paper of the ways in which external agents can have negative impacts, or in some cases alter local power dynamics in the favour of some over others.

All of the villagers had experienced war and displacement, with many of the men having come out of years of war with a stronger unity as Uzbeks than had existed before. The idea that women would run away because they thought outsiders would take them away to foreign countries was obviously something that had been told to them to strengthen the barrier between women and any outsiders. Although idealising life outside of the village is likely common, it is probably also true that contact with outsiders, including this research team, is already having an impact on the way the villagers see themselves.

On the other hand, the perceptions of the villagers towards outsiders also illustrated a conundrum: their aspirations include education for boys and girls, and yet the women remain secluded both physically and intellectually from the development processes going on around them. The ways in which the NGOs choose to engage with these communities, and others like it, will have to be carefully thought out both to ensure that this dynamic is not further entrenched as well as to ensure that attempts to involve women are done at a pace that takes into account local gender dynamics, suspicions and concerns about the role of external agents.

## Section VI: Conclusion and Recommendations

### From the household to the community – public vs. private decisions

In Hazrat-e Sultan the study was difficult to undertake because of the local gender norms and cultural pride which dictated that women not speak with outsiders. In Khoram the effort was made much easier in part because of the level of education and exposure to outsiders. The research team chose to spend most of the time in the former because of the lack of research done in ethnic Uzbek areas, but also because the difficulty in accessing women and discussing gender issues in this area may be instructive for other areas where it may be difficult to engage in research and development activities.

While the findings from this study confirmed that it is indeed challenging to work in this area, as the Afghanaid staff emphasised repeatedly at the outset of the study, there is an enthusiasm for change among both women and men that must be creatively harnessed if development organisations are to operate in this area and promote some sort of positive and sustainable change for the women and men they seek to assist.

In this case, it has been very easy so far for the men to portray an outward appearance of being willing to give permission for women to engage in income generation activities. But at the time of this research, such initiatives had not materialised. Their participation in the decision making processes of the village were non-existent on a formal level, and were extremely difficult to identify on an informal level. Some of the women clearly had more access to information vis-a-vis their husbands than others, but it is clear that all uneducated people in the village were not fully participating and that the information they had was often inaccurate. This is an important tool for those with power to keep it from those without, and the causes and effects of this need to be better understood. As far as the research showed in Hazrat-e Sultan, even the establishment of a women's *shura* would meet with extreme challenges as there is a general lack of trust in initiatives organised from the outside.

### Recommendations

- **Hire local staff familiar with local languages and respectful of local traditions.** This would help to increase understanding between NGO and local populations, and increase trust in NGO objectives. This is particularly important in conservative areas, and should be prioritised. This will increase levels of trust and cooperation with NGO staff, and increase the likelihood of women being able and willing to participate in development initiatives.
- **Ensure that female and male staff at all levels of programming – from Kabul to the field – understand gender objectives, strategies for promoting them and how to identify whether progress is being made.** Local staff should be given training that increases their own awareness of gender issues, and enables them to identify relevant activities. Special consideration should be given to the particular needs and knowledge of female staff in implementing these. Field staff should be monitored by



Kabul staff for adherence with Afghanaid's principles of equality and participation and to harness promising practices to build on.

- **Local staff should have the capacity to address difficult issues such as power and authority within the context of development initiatives.** This requires ability to work with the powerful as well as the powerless; to be clear about the terms of participation, roles and responsibilities that Afghanaid is promoting; and to effectively communicate how these link with local priorities.
- **Prioritise initiatives that enable men and women to gain practical knowledge, particularly those which enable better communication between them.** This could include initiatives such as health education, sanitation or literacy if it is linked to practical outputs which can have a cascade effect if those trained are encouraged to pass this knowledge on.
- **Include conflict resolution as part of the methodology of working with villagers.** This should focus on facilitating men and women to identify and better articulate their own needs and interests, and enable them to better negotiate with each other to prioritise development initiatives.
- **Monitor and evaluate changes in gender dynamics before, during and after initiatives.** This would help Afghanaid to better understand the impact of their work on gender roles in decision making, and highlight good practices that can be instructive to other organisations engaged in similar work.

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## Appendix 1: Story of a Family Dispute

This story was told to the female researchers by a middle-aged married disabled woman, who had married her daughter to her brother's son four months earlier.

*I married my daughter to my brother's son, but when she moved to his house her mother-in-law collected all of the gifts I sent with my daughter and locked them in a room. My daughter sent a message to her father, and when he went there her mother-in-law gave the things back. But when I sent my son to go, my brother beat my son and they started fighting with each other. My son threw a rock at him and broke his tooth. Later when I went, he also beat me. My brother complained to the uleswal about this, but when he heard my story he found that my brother was guilty. He said he had to pay the uleswal 20,000 Afs [US\$400] and if he did not pay it he would put my brother in jail for 18 years. He said that if he didn't pay he would kill him and that I could go free...*

*When I invited my daughter to come visit me after she was married, my brother brought wood and hit me and told me to go back home. It is because my brother always listens to his wife. She is powerful because she went to the mullah and he made some magic. My brother told my daughter, I will kill you and your parents cannot do anything – and we will be happy. He was angry because I took brideprice for my daughter, and he didn't think he would have to pay anything because he is my brother. Everyone gives their daughters away, but they [parents-in-law] always let their daughters-in-law come and meet their parents. But it has been four months now and he won't let her come and see me.*

*Another reason he is mad is that I did not let the groom come and meet her after they were engaged, even though it is our custom – they can even become pregnant before they are married. But my husband is from Tashgurgahn and he did not give this permission for this because it is not their custom. My brother is Uzbek and he is cruel, and he thought I would give her for free.*

*Since I went to the uleswal and my brother was found guilty, I feel ashamed in front of the villagers. If my brother is still cruel to my daughter, I will go back to him even if my brother kills me. My brother told me "I will kill you if you come to my house and you will not be able to see your daughter." This is the first time a case has gone to the uleswal.*

*I feel shy because most of the villagers do not go to the uleswal, if there are problems between family members. I took only 18 luk brideprice for my daughter and he paid me over three years. I gave her for free because she was for my brother's son. If she goes outside it is no problem, but he will not let her come and see her mother.*

*In the end my brother became ashamed and asked for my forgiveness, but I didn't want to forgive him because I could not forget his cruelty to my daughter. My husband forgave him, because I was with the uleswal and he thought that if I did not forgive him I would have to stay in there and who would take care of the children?*

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